

Good call, City Hall, in reviving Hub's wi-fi

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Apple CEO Steve Jobs grabbed the headlines as he strutted the stage in San Francisco last week to unveil his company's first cell phone.

Here in the Hub, Pam Reeve is getting no such limelight. But the former business exec is about to unveil a high-tech development that is likely to change your world far more.

Reeve was tapped by Mayor Thomas Menino last year to rescue Boston's wireless Internet or wi-fi project. And the word around City Hall is that she may be ready to switch on the first phase of the new network in a matter of weeks.

A year ago it looked like we'd be the last big U.S. city to get a network running. Now it looks like we'll be among the first. Credit where credit is due - to the mayor, to the task force that got the ball rolling and to Reeve and her team.

I have to confess, last year I was among the skeptics. So I'm now happy to eat a double helping of humble pie (a la mode, of course).

The first pilot phase of the network should cover about 1 square mile south of Dudley Square. You can also get online right now around City Hall Plaza, Faneuil Hall and Columbus Square Park.

Reeve aims to cover the city by the end of 2008 - a target, she adds, that terrifies her.

Wireless Internet sounds like one of those things that only geeks care about. But it could end up saving your family hundreds of dollars a year in cell phone, home phone and Internet bills. You'll be able to get broadband Internet access from anywhere around town, without wires or cables.

And thanks to emerging technology, you should be able to use the network for voice calls as well.

Total cost to you? About \$10 to \$12 a month, predicts Reeve.

Boston wi-fi will also bring affordable broadband within reach of everyone. Right now in this city, one of the high-tech capitals of the world, 80 percent of our public school students don't have access to broadband at home.

What is most remarkable is that this network is being built without taxpayers' money.

Reeve is working for free. She is trying to raise the \$16 million to \$20 million she needs from local businesses, foundations and other interested parties. Reeve says they've been forthcoming so far. But she confesses she remains worried about fund-raising.

I would have thought loans on easy terms would be easier to find than donations, but we'll see.

Wi-fi is terrible news yet again for the telecommunications industry, which is only just recovering from the meltdown of a few years ago. Cities across America are building similar networks. That means new and very cheap competition for companies like Verizon, Cingular, Comcast and T-Mobile. They've spent billions upgrading their private networks. Now, to keep customers, they'll have to slash prices.

Compared to this, Steve Job's sexy new phone will eventually seem small news.